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Bottoms Up! Secrets to Overcoming Cultural Barriers for Data Collection in Vietnam

Phi, Giang

Published in:
Asian Qualitative Research in Tourism

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Phi, G. (2018). Bottoms Up! Secrets to Overcoming Cultural Barriers for Data Collection in Vietnam. In P. Mura, & C. Khoo-Lattimore (Eds.), *Asian Qualitative Research in Tourism : Ontologies, Epistemologies, Methodologies, and Methods* (pp. 311). Springer. Perspectives of Asian Tourism

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Bottoms Up! Secrets to Overcoming Cultural Barriers for Data Collection in Vietnam

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Qualitative data collection in remote areas of Asia can be rather challenging, especially when the researchers come from very different cultural backgrounds to the participants and the research topics centre on sensitive issues such as poverty. In 2014, as part of a research project investigating microfinance tourism and poverty alleviation in developing countries, the researcher set out to conduct semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders in Phu Minh commune, Hoa Binh Province, Vietnam. Classified as a remote rural area, Phu Minh is home to the Muong ethnic minority of around 2500 people. Despite also being a Vietnamese, the researcher belongs to the Kinh ethnic and speaks Kinh language, as opposed to the Muong language often spoken by the Phu Minh community. Given the language barriers and the local community's reserved nature towards outsiders, the initial data collection process did not go well. Besides those who declined to participate in the research, people who participated tended to give out standard 'textbook' answers to questions regarding poverty issues, instead of their personal opinions or personal stories.

To overcome these challenges, the researcher stayed with a local family for 15 days and, during this time, invited herself to various events such as a local government meeting, a retirement party, a wedding and an annual ethnic cultural festival. These events provided unique opportunities for the researcher to introduce herself to the whole community and significantly helped to open up the flow of conversations with the local members. Interestingly, Phu Minh community possessed a strong drinking culture, and local people often considered the act of drinking rice wine shots in bottoms up manner as a sign of respect and bonding. The researcher's strong drinking ability in these events thus further contributed to creating a good impression. In addition, the host family members volunteered to accompany the researcher throughout the data collection process and assisted in translating when the participants felt uncomfortable to speak the Kinh language. These strategies contributed to yield very rich data regarding the root causes of Phu Minh poverty, such as the mass land seize by the government for private investors, unequal access to clean water (i.e. the water manufactory in Phu Minh only supplies water to citizens of Hanoi capital) and the links between heavy drinking culture with domestic violence and female poverty. Overall, investing sufficient effort to build trust and rapport with the potential respondents has proven to be the key to success in this case.